

Talking to God sermon series
#3 – How Jesus Taught Us to Pray
Matthew 6:5-15
March 15, 2009

It's interesting that we call this "The Lord's Prayer" because it really isn't the Lord's prayer. It's the disciples' prayer. In Matthew, Jesus teaches the prayer as part of his Sermon on the Mount. In Luke he teaches it in direct response to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray." What he offers is what we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer.

As we continue our sermon series on prayer, I believe we have to work hard to approach this passage with an open mind. For most of us this prayer is so familiar that we might miss what's going on here. We all know this prayer. We've said it a zillion times. In fact, the Lord's Prayer is the second most frequently spoken prayer in the world, right behind, "Dear Lord, please don't tell me I locked my keys in the car." The danger with such a familiar prayer like the Lord's Prayer is that it can become rote and lose its flavor. When you've said it so much, do you even know what you're saying?

Just the fact that Jesus gives us this prayer in the context of a teaching moment makes an interesting point: We have to be taught to pray. In the public speaking class I teach, I talk about how everyone assumes they know how to listen well. If you have two ears, you can listen. But actually, good listening is a skill that must be learned. Prayer is the same way. Praying takes learning and practice. Jesus gives a couple examples of not praying well – praying to be heard by others or praying lengthy prayers with the hopes of boring God into answering just so we'll shut up. That's not the point of prayer, Jesus says.

Instead, said Jesus, there's another way to pray. There are several things we can learn from this prayer that are applicable to our own prayer life. If you want to be better at praying, this is a good place to start. First, did you notice how it doesn't start? It doesn't start by asking for stuff. Jesus doesn't encourage us to lay out a shopping list of needs. Interestingly, asking is a part of this prayer, but not until we give God the proper praise and acknowledgment. No matter how urgent our request, it is only when God is given God's proper place that all other things fall into their places.

The prayer starts with an interesting paradox that I think defines a lot about our faith. The statement "our Father" connotes a special kind of intimacy without being too chummy. It conveys a parental closeness with a healthy sense of reverence. But it's followed up with "in heaven." So right away we are encouraged to acknowledge God's intimate closeness and God's majestic Otherness, covering the totality of who God is for us. God is both our Parent and the ruler of the Cosmos.

And God's name should be hallowed. To hallow something is to treat it as sacred. "Hallowed" is like "haloed." It's a way of giving God honor: "Your name is holy." It's another way of saying that the One to whom we pray is greater than we could ever imagine. We speak a lot of names during the day, but we should speak God's name differently.

Growing up, I knew I was in trouble when I got called by my first and middle name: "Kory Thomas!" In fact, I still say that to myself when I mess up. Often we can tell simply by the tone of voice if someone is mad at us or happy with us or adoring us. I hear it from my girls all the time (say "Daddy" several different ways). But we are to speak God's name differently. We are to speak God's name in a way that conveys the holiness and reverence it deserves.

Next comes the first request of the prayer, but it's not a personal request. Jesus says, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." This is not some pie-in-the-sky request. First and foremost, before we ask anything for ourselves, we must acknowledge that it is God's will that must be done. In Jesus' days it was believed that God's kingdom was indeed coming soon, that God would come to earth and restore peace and harmony. People wanted that to happen more than they wanted anything else: "Your kingdom come."

I think how we say this line says something about what we believe. I always thought you said it with the emphasis on the nouns of the sentence: "Thy **kingdom** come, Thy **will** be done." But I learned from a very wise person that the emphasis probably belongs on the pronouns instead: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." There are a lot of kingdoms in the world competing for prominence and a lot of wills jostling to be done (our own included!). By shifting the cadence in how we say this line, we are committing to our role of putting God's kingdom and God's will first in our lives.

Only after praising God, revering God's name and lifting up the priority of God's will does Jesus offer the first personal petition: "Give us this day our daily bread." Notice again the pronouns. You will not find "I, me, mine" in this prayer. It's all "we, us, ours." Through this prayer we are knitted together with other believers into one community under God's love and power. Our prayers are meant to seek God's goodness for everyone, not just for ourselves. Prayers that seek blessings at the expense of others go against the teaching here. If we pray harm on someone else, if we pray to be lifted up at someone else's expense, we're not praying the Lord's prayer.

This line about bread alludes to the Israelites' time wandering in the wilderness, when God provided manna for them each day. Each morning, when they woke up and came out of their tents, there was bread on the ground. They were only to gather enough for that day; if they took more, it would go bad. That's almost a foreign concept to us today, isn't it? Taking only what we need to survive each day. I continue to be astounded at the size of the portions restaurants serve. I ordered a salad the other day and the bowl was so big I sat in the middle of it to eat. It's almost obscene how much food we have at our disposal, and how much of it gets disposed. There's an imbalance in this world. There are those who have way too much to eat, and those who don't have nearly enough. This line in the prayer promises that we will take each day only what we need to sustain us, allowing others the chance to do the same.

But this line is about more than just nutritional sustenance. When Jesus is being tempted by Satan in the desert, Jesus tells him, "Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." This line acknowledges that, just like we need to eat every day, we need contact with God every day. That relationship is as essential as the food we eat. We can't store it all up on Sunday and then not talk to God for six days. We need daily feeding and contact as a way of recognizing our dependence on God's abiding presence in our lives. Our daily bread, our daily sustenance, is our relationship and connection with God. If we are not nurturing that, we are starving ourselves.

Next comes the line that gives a lot of people fits: "Forgive us our debts" – that part is OK – "as we also have forgiven our debtors." Oh dear. That part doesn't go down so smoothly. As you know, in this church we use "debts." Other churches use "sins" and the Catholic church uses "trespasses." It's like the little boy who was reciting the Lord's Prayer and said, "And forgive us our trash baskets, as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."

That's actually a pretty good way to describe it. People DO put trash in our baskets, don't they? And we're often tempted to put trash right back into their baskets! Imagine if each time we

said something against someone else, we were putting trash in their baskets. That might make me think twice about what I say and do. But – to extend the metaphor well beyond its usefulness – God has emptied the trash we've put in God's basket. God has forgiven us of our debts, our sins, our trespasses. And because of that gift of grace, we are compelled to extend the same to others.

This isn't a causal relationship here. We don't forgive others in order to be forgiven. We forgive others as proof that we have received forgiveness. We can't open our hands to receive God's pardon if our fists are still closed against others. Forgiveness begets forgiveness, including the forgiving of ourselves.

The last line of Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One." This has always puzzled some folks. Why would God lead us into temptation? Isn't that Satan's job? But a more accurate translation is, "And do not lead us into a time of testing." There is actually a biblical history of God testing people: he did it with Abraham, he did it with Job. Jesus is simply telling the disciples to ask for God's protection at all times against the Evil One who is constantly trying to weaken our defenses and erode our resolve. We can't live this life alone. We need God with us.

That's the prayer Jesus offers as a model for how we are to approach God. I think it makes some pretty amazing claims about our prayers. It tells me that we don't pray to inform God of something God doesn't already know or to try and change God's mind. We don't pray to try and bend God's will to ours. Prayer is the submission of the creature to the Creator. Prayer is aligning ourselves in trust and acknowledging our need. When we pray, it is we who are changed as we express our dependence on God's goodness and mercy. We are confessing that we believe in a God who listens to us.

Jesus offers this prayer, not as a command, but as an invitation. We are invited to be in conversation with the One whose name is holy but who loves us like a parent. We are invited to participate in the ushering in of God's kingdom here on earth, just like it is in heaven. We are invited to be in relationship with the One who provides for our needs and offers us forgiveness. We are invited to find shelter with the One who protects us from the evils of the world and who is with us when we face difficult times. Even when we say a prayer we've said a thousand times, we are to say it as if we really believe what we're saying, that we really do want God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done. And we take comfort in the fact that our prayers are effective, not because of how much we say or how eloquently we say it, but because we pray to a God who loves us and hears us.